

Sky Spies: New Breed of Super Snoops

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THE GREAT OLD legends in spying, people like Mata Hari and Richard Sorge, are being eclipsed by a new generation of super snoops with names like "Cosmos" and "Big Bird."

The man in the trench coat and the beautiful seductress coaxing secrets out of government big-wigs are being automated out of jobs.

At the Central Intelligence Agency in the Washington suburb of Langley, Va., hundreds of clandestine operatives, known as "spooks" in the trade, are being asked to take early retirement. The reason: spy satellites, used by both the Soviets and the United States, can now uncover military secrets that an army of humans might never unravel.

The Soviets reportedly have rocketed at least 10 radar satellites into earth orbit in the last four years, operating over the Indian Ocean and the Baltic Sea.

Threat to Polaris?

Although the Soviet program is still considered experimental, with the satellites staying up for only a few weeks at a time, the sky spies pose a potential threat to the previously invincible U.S. Polaris submarines. The Cosmos satellites may be attempting to find U.S. subs deep in the ocean by detecting the heat given off by their engines.

Pentagon sources also believe that the Soviets are experimenting with satellites that can detect even the smallest amount of radioactivity coming from the nuclear subs.

Until now, the Navy has boasted that only its missile-carrying subs could hide successfully from the Soviets, that land-based U.S. Minuteman missiles or bombers can easily be targeted.

The Soviets also fired off a barrage of spy satellites last year over the Israeli-Egyptian battlefield. Unmanned Voshkod satellites, big enough to carry two men, were launched to snap pictures of the battlefield at noon under good lighting conditions.

The U.S. Air Force, very hush-hush about its own satellite program, reportedly launched some Mideast spy satellites from Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif.

This kind of technological wizardry can hardly be matched by an agent on the ground, who may spend years winning the confidence of government bureaucrats before gaining access to military secrets. And espionage experts wonder if the value

of the information that only human spies can collect—such as urine samples of foreign leaders—is worth the effort and the cost.

Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger dispatched a batch of spies and dirty tricks experts into retirement during his brief tenure as CIA director last year.

Of course, the espionage game will always need humans and, occasionally, a spy can work his way into the confidence of an important world leader. The most recent success story was Guenter Guillaume, the East German spy who served as aide-de-camp to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. Guillaume's arrest last month led to Brandt's abrupt fall from power.

A major drawback to human spy missions is the risk of being caught, confessing, and embarrassing the folks back home. Francis Gary Powers, for example, was shot down while piloting his U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union in May, 1960, and a planned Soviet-U.S. summit conference blew up as a result of the uproar after the Russians captured Powers. The capture of the spy ship Pueblo off North Korea in 1968 caused more problems for the United States when the crew was forced to "confess." Satellites, of course, can't be tortured.

Air Force Secretary John L. McLucas is particularly interested in satellite technology, but greets questions about sky spying with a smiling "no comment." However, it is known that the Air Force has been in the spy satellite business for quite some time.

Four years ago, for example, the Air Force fired off the first of a series of satellites from Cape Kennedy equipped with tv cameras and x-ray sensors to watch over the Soviet Union, China and North Vietnam. The satellites were designed to give early warning of any enemy missile shots from land or from subs. The sensors can detect the exhaust of a rocket fired off a launch pad, and the cameras can snap pictures of troop movements or missile sites.

In recent years, the U.S. has been developing expensive satellites like Lockheed's Big Bird which can stay up for months. But the Russians have been firing off more satellites, according to Pentagon sources.

There are still some bugs to be worked out of the satellite programs, as Gregory R. Copley of Defense Foreign Affairs Digest reported recently. The Cosmos satellites used by the Russians during the Arab-Israeli conflict "apparently did not transmit their photos back to earth via electronic means but in capsule form" by parachute. This kind of delivery is too slow for rapidly developing battlefield conditions.

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